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Agenda item 4

PREPARATIONS FOR THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF AN OVERALL REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21

DIALOGUE SESSIONS WITH MAJOR GROUPS

Summary report of the dialogue session with workers and trade unions

(14 April 1997)

Chairman: Ambassador Bagher Asadi (Islamic Republic of Iran), Vice-Chairman, Commission on Sustainable development

Facilitator: Ms. Clayola Brown, Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), United States of America

Presenters: Representatives of the following organizations and programmes made presentations: Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, United States of America; Central Unica dos Trabalhadores, Brazil; Graphical Workers' Union, Sweden; Canadian Labor Congress; Mine, Geological and Oil Workers, Czech Republic; Laborers' International Union, United States of America; Zimbabwe Council of Trade Unions; Indian National Trade Union Congress; Worker Education and Environment, ACTRAV/ILO Project; Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees; Trades Union Congress; Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union.

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PRESENTATIONS

Many global sustainability problems, such as hunger, ill-health, illiteracy, unemployment, industrial accidents and social tensions, have actually increased since the 1992 Rio Conference. Trade unions have recognized these trends and want to address them. Trade unions have therefore collected success stories and extracted from them the concept of "collective engagement". This engagement entails education, consultation and action which harnesses the energies of workers and other members of society in transforming ideas about sustainable development into action.

Activities

Trade unionists have undertaken a spectrum of activities ranging from harmonization and standard-setting to eco-labelling. The following are examples:

- Tripartite negotiations involving industry, workers and government in Brazil resulted in an accord regarding control of chemicals, such as benzene, in the workplace.

- Cooperative efforts between municipal officials, unions and industry in Sweden led to the development of ecologically friendly practices in the printing industry. The holistic approach adopted led to substitution and recycling of chemicals and improvements in water quality and biological diversity.

- The latest session of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety has seen increased cooperation between labour and international environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- Trade unions have worked through national delegations to support progressive standards of chemical labelling.

- A union of mine workers from the Czech Republic engaged the expertise of Cornell University to help the union raise the ecological consciousness of its members and other community members via training and participation in eco-audits.

- The Laborers' International Union of North America has contributed to remediation and environmental clean-up concerning hazardous wastes.

- The Zimbabwe Council of Trade Unions helped to identify how trade unions in developing countries can help to alleviate poverty.

- The Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees has carried out eco-labelling and integrated office management programmes.

- Groups in the United Kingdom have developed the EcoManagement and Audit Scheme, which involves monitoring, observing, record-keeping, reporting, evaluating and making changes in regard to worksite health, safety and environment programmes.

- The Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union illustrated how enforceable codes of conduct might be used as mechanisms for implementing sustainable development.

- The ACTRAV/ILO Project has developed extensive training materials and programmes around ILO conventions and recommendations as sustainable development indicators.

Obstacles

Trade unions identified several obstacles to their sustainable development efforts and to the realization of sustainable development in general. Foremost among these are obstacles concerning lack of workers' rights, barriers to participation, and insufficient funds. For example:

- International organizations often do not recognize the role that workers and trade unions play and can play in furthering sustainable development through workplace cooperation.

- Workers are often denied their rights, particularly the freedom to associate.

- Governments and other social groups have resisted the participation of trade unions in collective efforts to address sustainable development issues.

- Trade unions' efforts to further sustainable development require monetary resources, resources which international organizations and other donor institutions are not readily providing.

- Poverty is an obstacle to sustainable development in general and therefore frustrates the efforts of trade unions in attempting to further sustainable practices.

- Distortions in the global trading system obstruct efforts to realize a sustainable world.

- Provisions for capacity-building have not been effective, particularly regarding chapter 19, section B, of Agenda 21 on the harmonization of classification and labelling of chemicals.

Priorities

Many of the following priorities point towards increased awareness of trade union interest in sustainable development:

- Put the workplace at the top of the sustainable development agenda, particularly with respect to production and consumption patterns.

- Encourage the active participation of workers in workplace environmental audits.

- Encourage trade union/employer partnerships and agreements in implementing Agenda 21 objectives.

- Gain access to decision-making bodies that address sustainable development issues.

- Ensure workers' rights throughout the world.

- Address people's immediate needs, especially those arising from poverty, before pursuing sustainable development.

- Address the political, social and economic issues attendant to sustainable development.

DIALOGUE

Representatives of the following Governments made statements: Ecuador, Netherlands, Philippines, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America. A statement was also made by the representative of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNDP).

One government representative welcomed the concept of collective engagement and asked how to further the realization of this concept (United States). Others asked about the applicability of the EcoManagement and Auditing Scheme (EMAS) in developing countries and the relationship between EMAS and ISO 14,000. One government representative warned against reliance on market forces (Netherlands). Those who noted the growing importance of informal economies and the absence of the right mechanisms to deal with sustainability also called for national systems of regulation to ensure health and environmental protection (Ecuador). One government representative noted that NGOs were the main forces resisting the inclusion of trade unions on his country's Council for Sustainable Development (Philippines). The representative of UNEP posed a question on the involvement of workers and trade unions in voluntary environmental codes and programmes that are being developed by business and industry.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Challenges and recommendations focused on increased recognition of linkages between sustainable development and the workplace, as well as greater worker and trade union participation in decision-making bodies. For example:

- Put the workplace at the top of the sustainable development agenda, especially for changes to production and consumption patterns.

- Recognize the role that trade unions can play in furthering sustainable development.

- Encourage cooperation among employers, workers and Governments.

- Support ILO initiatives and work to integrate ILO programmes and sustainable development activities.

- Encourage Governments to develop workplace linkages to national reporting and monitoring systems.

- Encourage Governments to include trade union representatives in decision-making regarding sustainable development.

- Support making eco-management and audit practices compulsory, open to the public and independently validated.

- Urge Governments to support NGOs and trade unions in eco-labelling programmes.

- Encourage environmental education at all levels in the school system.

- Ensure adherence to safety, health, environment and child labour laws in producer countries and promote the use of codes of conduct in implementing sustainable development initiatives.